

# your guide to condoms

Helping you choose the method  
of contraception that's best for you

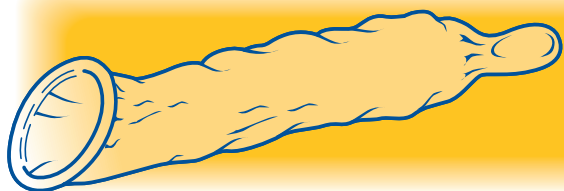


# Condoms

Condoms are barrier methods of contraception. They help prevent pregnancy by stopping sperm meeting an egg. They also help protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

An external condom fits over an erect penis. It's made of very thin latex (rubber), polyurethane (soft plastic) or polyisoprene. It's sometimes called a male condom.

An internal condom is put in the vagina and loosely lines it. It's made of polyurethane or nitrile polymer (synthetic rubber). It's sometimes called a female condom.



## How effective are condoms?

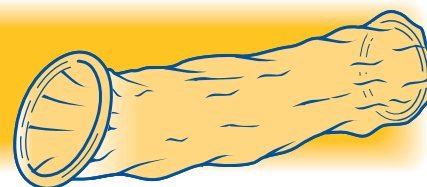
If 100 sexually active women don't use any contraception, 80 to 90 will become pregnant in one year.

**External condoms** – If **always** used correctly, according to instructions, they're 98% effective at preventing pregnancy. This means that 2 in 100 women will get pregnant in one year.

If they're not always used correctly, about 18 in 100 women will get pregnant in one year.

**Internal condoms** – If **always** used correctly, according to instructions, they're 95% effective at preventing pregnancy. This means that 5 in 100 women will get pregnant in one year.

If they're not always used correctly, about 21 in 100 women will get pregnant in one year.



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## Can anything make condoms less effective?

Sperm can get into the vagina during sex, even if you use a condom. This may happen if:

- the penis touches the area around the vagina **before** a condom is put on (pre-ejaculation fluid (pre-cum), which leaks out of the penis before ejaculation, may contain sperm)
- the condom splits
- the condom doesn't fit properly
- the external condom is put on inside-out
- you don't use the condom according to instructions
- the external condom slips off the penis
- the internal condom gets pushed into the vagina
- the penis enters the vagina outside of an internal condom
- the condom gets damaged, for example by sharp fingernails or jewellery
- you use too much or too little lubricant
- you use oil-based products (such as body lotions) with latex condoms; these can damage the condom.

If any of these happen, or if you've had sex without using contraception, you can get advice about emergency contraception (see page 14).

## Where can I get condoms?

Condoms are free from contraception and sexual health clinics, young people's services, genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics and some general practices.

They may be available for free at some pharmacies and other locations as part of local schemes.

You can buy them from a pharmacy or online. External condoms are widely available from vending machines, supermarkets, petrol stations and other shops.

Make sure there's a CE mark on the pack. This shows the condoms meet safety standards. If the pack also has a BSI Kitemark this shows the condoms have been independently tested to meet high quality standards.



## What are the advantages of condoms?

- You only need to use them when you have sex.
- They help to protect both partners from some sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.
- There are no serious side effects from using condoms.
- External condoms come in a variety of shapes, sizes and textures.
- External condoms are easily available.
- An internal condom can be put in any time before sex.

## What are the disadvantages of condoms?

- External condoms can sometimes slip off or split.
- Internal condoms can sometimes slip out or get pushed into the vagina.
- Some people are sensitive to latex condoms, though this is rare.
- When using an external condom, you have to

pull out after you've ejaculated, before your penis goes soft, holding the condom firmly in place at the base of the penis.

- When using an internal condom, you need to make sure the penis is in the condom and not between the condom and vagina and that the open end of the condom stays outside the vagina.

### Can anyone use condoms?

Yes, condoms are suitable for most people.

Some people are sensitive to the latex on external condoms. If this is a problem you can use external polyurethane (soft plastic) condoms or internal condoms.

If you have trouble keeping your erection during sex, it might be difficult to use external condoms.

Internal condoms may not be suitable if you aren't comfortable touching your genital area.

### How do I use an external condom?

You'll find instructions on the condom packet or in a leaflet inside the pack. You can also ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Use a new condom each time you have sex. Check the 'use by' date on the packet – if it's out of date, don't use it. Be careful how you take the condom out of the packet – sharp fingernails and jewellery can tear the condom.

Find the teat or closed end and hold it between your thumb and finger to keep the air out. This will help you roll the condom on the right way round.

Put the condom on when the penis is fully erect and before the penis touches the vagina, genital area, anus or mouth.

Still holding the end, roll the condom all the way down the penis.



If it won't roll down then it's probably on inside out. If so, throw it away and start again with a new condom as sperm could now be on the first one.

If you have foreskin, you may find it easier

and more comfortable to put the condom on if the foreskin is pulled back. This lets the foreskin move freely and reduces the risk of the condom tearing or slipping off.

For anal sex, the use of additional lube is important to help prevent the condom breaking. You may need to apply additional silicone or water-based lube in and around the anus.

As soon as you've ejaculated, and before your penis goes soft, hold the condom firmly in place at the base of the penis while pulling out.

Do this slowly and carefully so you don't spill any semen (the ejaculation fluid that contains sperm).

Take off the condom, wrap it and put it in a bin. Never put it down the toilet.

Make sure the penis doesn't touch the genital area again, and if you have sex again, use a new condom.



### How do I use an internal condom?

The packet contains instructions.

Use a new condom every time you have sex.

Check the 'use by' date on the packet – if it's out of date, don't use it.

You can put the condom in any time before sex if you want to. Always put it in before the penis touches the vagina, genital area or anus.

Be careful how you take the condom out of the packet – sharp fingernails and jewellery can tear the condom.

You can put the condom in the vagina when you're lying down, squatting or with one leg on a chair. Find the position that suits you best.

Hold the closed end of the condom and squeeze the inner ring between your thumb and middle finger. Keeping your index finger on the inner ring helps you to insert the condom into the vagina.

With your other hand,

separate the labia (folds of skin) around your vagina. Put the squeezed ring into the vagina and push it up as far as you can. Make sure the outer ring stays close against the area outside your vagina (vulva).



It's a good idea to guide the penis into the condom to make sure it doesn't enter the vagina outside the condom. You may need to hold the outer ring in place, outside the vagina, to stop the condom being accidentally pushed into the vagina.

As the internal condom is loose-fitting, it'll move during sex.

But you'll still be protected as long as the penis stays inside the condom.

To remove the condom after sex, simply twist the outer ring to keep any semen inside. Then pull the condom out gently.

Wrap the condom and put it in a bin. Never put it down the toilet.

Make sure the penis doesn't touch the genital area again, and if you have sex again, use a new condom.



## When should I use lubricants with a condom?

Most external condoms come ready lubricated to make them easier to use. Some people like to use extra lubrication.

If you're using an external latex or polyisoprene condom, never use oil-based products – like body oils, creams, lotions or petroleum jelly – as a lubricant. These products can damage the latex and make the condom more likely to split. Some ointments can damage latex or polyisoprene. If you're using medication in the genital area (for example, creams, pessaries, or suppositories) ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if it'll affect latex

or polyisoprene condoms.

Water-based and silicone-based lubricants can be used with all types of external condom.

Any lubricant can be used with external polyurethane (soft plastic) condoms.

Check the condom packaging to see what a condom is made from.

Some condoms don't have any lubricant on them so that you can choose not to use lubricant, or to use a lubricant of your own choice.

Internal condoms come ready lubricated to make them easier to use. Some people use extra lubrication. Any lubricant can be used with internal condoms. This includes body oils, creams, lotions or petroleum jelly. If you're using medication in the genital area, for example, creams, suppositories or pessaries, you can still use internal condoms.

### Do I need to use spermicide?

No. If used correctly, condoms are an effective method of contraception and you don't need additional spermicide (a chemical that kills sperm).

A few types of external condom are lubricated with spermicide. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinol-9, which may increase the risk of HIV infection. Try and avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms and don't use spermicide as a lubricant.

### I've just had a baby, can I use condoms?

Yes. You can use condoms any time after the birth. Using extra lubricant can make sex more comfortable.

### Can I use condoms after a miscarriage or abortion?

Yes. You can use condoms immediately after a miscarriage or abortion.

## Are there different types of condom?

There are many types of external condoms including regular, larger, trim, stimulating and fun.

### Regular condoms

These are an average length and width to suit most penises and are straight-sided with a round or teated end. You may feel more comfortable with a larger or smaller condom.

### Larger condoms

These are condoms designed to fit a larger penis. They vary in shape and some are flared to improve comfort and make them easier to put on.

### Smaller condom

Often known as trim condoms, small condoms are designed for a thinner or shorter penis.

### Made-to-measure condoms

Custom-made condoms are for people who can't find a condom that's comfortable or the right size.

### Ejaculation delayers

Most ejaculation delayer condoms contain benzocaine. Benzocaine is a low strength local anaesthetic, similar to that used in throat lozenges. It's in the condom lubricant or teat. It temporarily numbs the nerve endings of the penis.

### Heightened stimulation condoms

Some condoms have a special lubricant that creates a warm or tingling sensation for both partners. Others have extra lubricant to increase sensation. Textured condoms – for example, ribbed, dotted, or studded – aim to increase sensation during sex.

**Fun condoms**

Coloured, flavoured, glow-in-the-dark and novelty condoms aim to make sex more fun. Check the packaging as some novelty condoms may not be suitable to use as contraception or to help protect from sexually transmitted infections.

**Strong condoms**

These condoms are slightly thicker and sometimes have extra lubricant. They're usually made of latex. Strong condoms are not less likely to break.

**Thin condoms**

These condoms are thinner than a regular condom, providing greater sensitivity for both partners.

**Vegan condoms**

Many latex condoms contain a milk protein called casein. Vegan condoms don't contain animal products.

**Lambskin condoms**

These are made from animal products and aim to feel like natural skin. They won't help protect you from sexually transmitted infections. Don't use oil-based lube with lambskin condoms.

**Which condoms are best for oral sex?**

Any condoms can be used for oral sex, but oil-based products on the lips like lipstick or Vaseline may damage latex or polyisoprene condoms. Polyurethane types can be safely used. Flavoured condoms can be a good option.

Dams (soft plastic squares) can be used to cover the vulva or anus during oral sex to help protect from sexually transmitted infections.

**Which condoms are best for anal sex?**

Standard external condoms are suitable for anal sex. There's no evidence that stronger or thicker condoms are better or safer. Some people prefer to use internal condoms for anal sex. It's very important to use water-based or silicone-based lubricant to reduce the risk of the condom tearing.

**How are condoms tested to make sure they work?**

Condoms go through several different tests to check they're free from holes, the strength and stretch of the condom, the air pressure needed to burst one and the safety of the packaging. Look for a CE mark and/or a BSI Kitemark on the condoms (see [Where can I get condoms?](#) on page 4).

**Where should I keep condoms?**

Always keep packets of condoms and individual condoms where they can't be damaged by strong heat, sharp objects, light or damp.

**Going on holiday?**

It's a good idea to pack condoms – even if it's 'just in case'. If you're going abroad, take your favourite brand from the UK. That way you won't have to rely on a local brand which could be packaged in a foreign language or which may not have been made to the same standards.

## How do I find out about contraception services?

The National Sexual Health Helpline provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is **0300 123 7123**. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am – 8pm and at weekends from 11am – 4pm.

For more information on sexual health visit [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk)

Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

You can find details of sexual health clinics and services and details of general practices and pharmacies on these websites.

- England, [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- Wales, [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)
- Scotland, [www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)
- Northern Ireland, [www.sexualhealthni.info](http://www.sexualhealthni.info) and [www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)

## Emergency contraception

If you've had sex without contraception, or think your method might've failed, there are different types of emergency contraception you can use.

- An IUD (copper coil) is the most effective option. It can be fitted up to five days after sex, or up to five days after the earliest time you could've ovulated (released an egg).
- An emergency contraceptive pill with the active ingredient ulipristal acetate can be taken up to five days (120 hours) after sex. It's available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy. ellaOne is the only brand in the UK.

- An emergency contraceptive pill with the hormone levonorgestrel can be taken up to three days (72 hours) after sex. It's available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy. There are different brands.

Try to get emergency contraception as soon as possible after unprotected sex.

Emergency contraceptive pills are available for free from some pharmacies. Age restrictions may apply.

## Sexually transmitted infections

Most methods of contraception don't protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

External (male) and internal (female) condoms, when used correctly and consistently, can help protect against sexually transmitted infections.

If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinol-9, which may increase the risk of HIV infection.



## A final word

This booklet can only give you general information. The information is based on evidence-guided research from The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the World Health Organization.

All methods of contraception come with a Patient Information Leaflet which provides detailed information about the method.

Contact your doctor, practice nurse or a sexual health clinic if you're worried or unsure about anything.



the sexual health company



sexwise.org.uk

[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

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If you'd like information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to give feedback email [fpadirect@fpa.org.uk](mailto:fpadirect@fpa.org.uk)